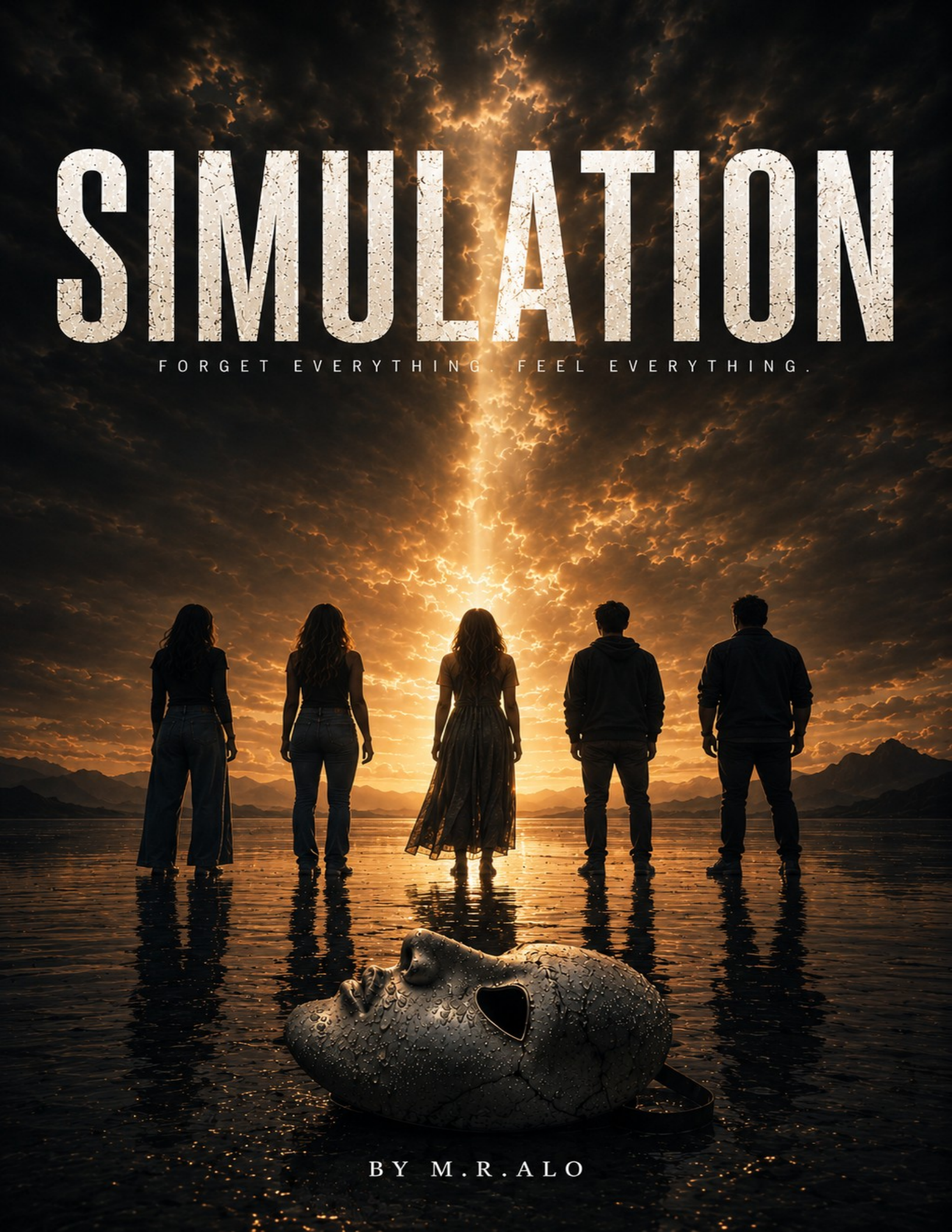
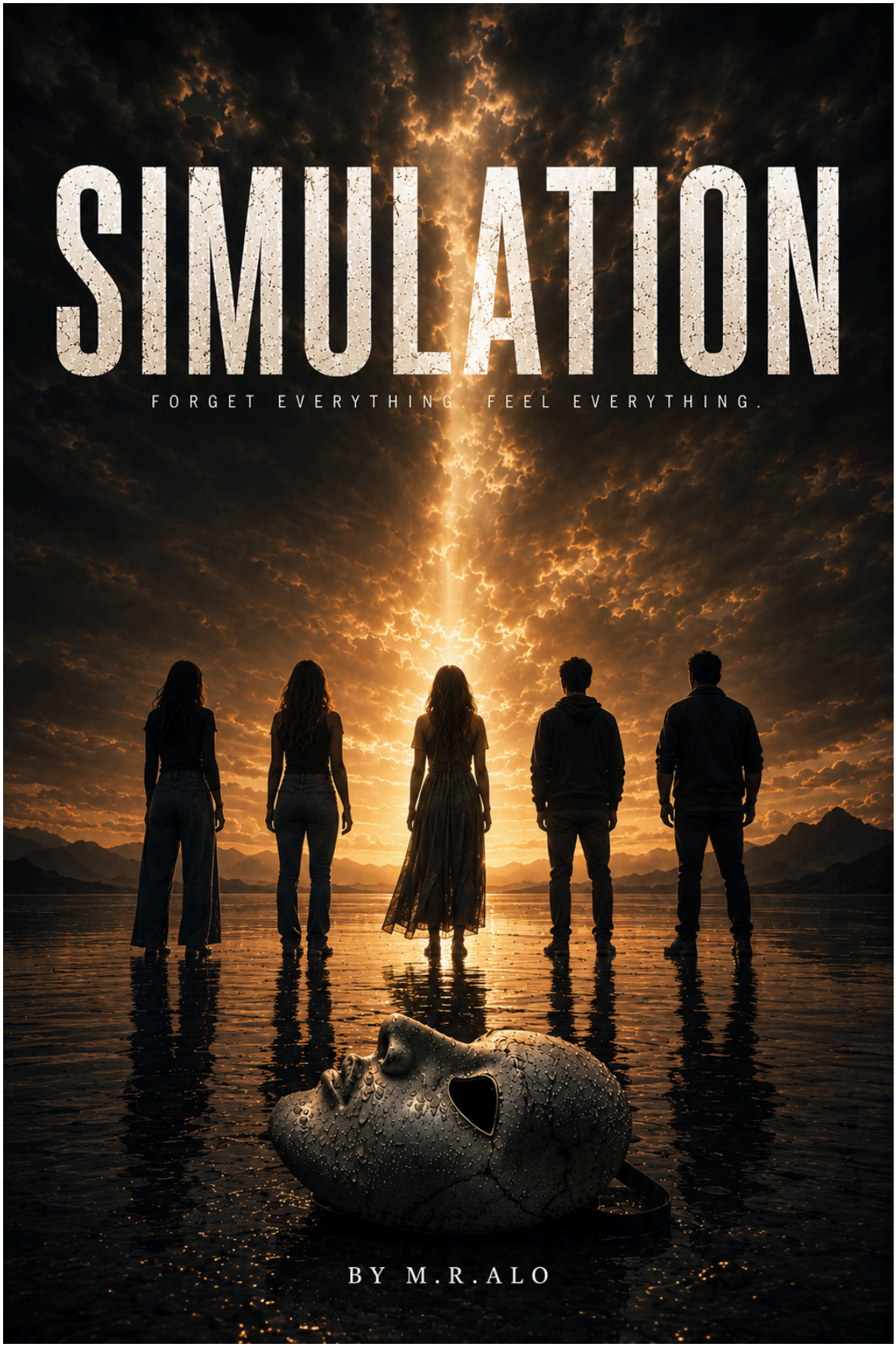
SIMULATION

FORGET EVERYTHING. FEEL EVERYTHING.



BY M.R.ALO


SIMULATION
FORGET EVERYTHING. FEEL EVERYTHING.
BY M.R.ALO

SIMULATION

a novel

By M. R. Alo

“Before you arrive, forget everything.
Forget that you chose this.
Forget that you are light wearing a costume of skin.
The forgetting is the whole point.
The remembering — that is the story.”

— adapted from James McCrae, “Instructions Before Visiting Earth”

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PROLOGUE

The Briefing Room

Before.

There is a place — if you can call it that — where place is a preference rather than a fact. Where the concept of wall and floor and ceiling is more of a social courtesy than a physical truth.

Call it the Briefing Room.

It doesn't look like much. It doesn't look like anything, really, because looking is a skill you practice with eyes, and eyes come later, packaged with the body, shipped with the forgetting. But if you need to imagine it — and humans always need to imagine things, it is perhaps their most endearing quality — imagine the feeling of standing at the edge of something vast. Imagine the moment before a held breath releases. That is the Briefing Room.

Five of them are here.

They know each other. They have always known each other, in the way that certain stars know they belong to the same constellation — not by proximity but by angle, by the specific pattern they make when seen from the right distance.

Before they go, each is given a frequency.

Not a word. Not an instruction. A frequency — a resonance, the way a tuning fork carries a note without sounding it. The frequency is theirs alone and it is the one thing the forgetting cannot fully erase. It lives below language, below memory, below the conscious self. It is the thing that will make certain strangers feel like old country. It is the thing that will make five people, in a mountain compound in

Batangas, feel — even before they know each other's names — that something is waking up.

When the five frequencies converge in the same physical space, the remembering begins.

That is the mechanic. The one rule underneath all the other rules.

One of them hesitates.

I don't want to forget them. I don't want to walk into it blind.

And the voice that is not a voice, that is the room itself, answers:

You have to. That is the contract. You feel it fully, or you feel nothing. There is no middle option. The limitation is not punishment. It is the whole design.

But—

No. There is no but. The frequency is set. Go now.

And so.

You will forget us. You will forget this. You will forget that you chose the heartbreak and the longing and the years that passed like water through your hands.

You will feel them as real.

That is the point.

Find each other. Lose each other. Choose each other again. The love is not the reward. The love is the lesson.

Go now. Forget. Live.

And they go.

One by one, they go.

And the forgetting begins immediately, which is to say the story begins now, which is to say:

Here.

PART ONE

LOADING

CHAPTER ONE

Grace: The Woman Who Measured Everything

Grace Mallari, 34. Manila-born, London-educated, currently adrift in a Makati studio apartment with blackout curtains and three half-finished cups of coffee on her desk.

The first thing Grace did every morning was check her metrics.

Not her health metrics — though she checked those too, her Garmin data parsed into color-coded graphs that told her she wasn't sleeping well, which she already knew, which was the problem with measuring things: sometimes the numbers told you what you already felt, and then you had to feel it twice.

The metrics she checked first were her life metrics. A spreadsheet called LIFE_AUDIT_v14.xlsx. It tracked calories, words written per day, hours of human contact, hours of meaningful human contact (a separate column, because she'd learned the difference mattered enormously), money in, money out, and in the last column, a field she'd labeled Satisfaction Score, rated on a scale of one to ten.

Today she gave it a four.

She had been giving it between three and five for approximately eight months. Statistically interesting. Personally devastating.

She was not, by any clinical measure, depressed. She had checked. Seventeen different online assessments. The pie chart said: functional. Optimized, even.

She had a best friend — Myk, who called every other week and whose calls Grace always answered, because Myk's voice was the

kind of voice that made the world feel slightly less like a spreadsheet.

She had a therapist she hadn't seen in three months. She had no boyfriend. The last one — Daniel — had told her, gently, that being with her felt like being studied. "I don't need to be a variable, Grace." She'd wanted to say that was the kindest thing anyone had ever called her. She understood that was perhaps the problem.

Her phone buzzed. Myk.

"Good morning," Grace said.

"It is seven-twelve in the morning and I have done something."

"Define something."

"I signed us up for a retreat."

"What kind. How many participants. Who facilitates."

"I love you. Those are not the right questions."

"I didn't book it because I thought it would be fun," Myk said. "I booked it because of the list."

Grace's typing stopped.

The list. The document she'd made at twenty-nine when she started to feel the gap between who she was and who she was supposed to become. A list of the things she was afraid she would never feel. Not achieve. Feel.

Loved, without performance.

Surprised, genuinely.

Still.

Enough.

"You're not playing fair," Grace said.

"No. I'm playing real."

“Who else is going?” she asked. Which was the way Grace said yes when she wasn’t ready to say it out loud.

“Some people. Guy named Redge runs it. Mountains. No signal.”

Grace looked at column J. Today’s four stared back at her.

She closed the spreadsheet. She opened her browser, searched flights to London, looked at one for about eleven seconds, then closed the tab. She opened her bag and started to pack.

Her hands were shaking slightly. She noticed this the way she noticed most things — clinically, from a small distance. She filed it under Unknown Variables and kept packing.

She didn’t open the spreadsheet again for seven days.

This will be important later.

CHAPTER TWO

Rei: The Boy Who Stopped Speaking

Rei Santos, 26. Former seminarian, current barista, resident of a boarding house in Cubao where the walls are thin enough to hear his neighbors pray at night.

Rei had not chosen silence the way people choose things they want. He had chosen it the way people choose to set something down when it becomes too heavy — not with decision so much as with the slow, inevitable opening of tired hands.

He still spoke. He spoke at work: what size, what milk, your name for the order, have a good one. He spoke when the silence would have been ruder than the words. But he no longer said the things he meant.

He had left the seminary in his third year. He still believed. That was the thing people didn't understand — they assumed leaving meant losing. It didn't. What he'd lost was the container, not the contents. The container had been too small. Or he had grown too large for it. He still couldn't decide which framing was more honest.

He believed that consciousness was not an accident. That love — real love, the kind that costs you — was a form of physics. He just didn't believe it was God. Not the God they were teaching him.

His co-worker Dessa showed him the flyer during the mid-morning lull. "My cousin went last year. Said it was weird. Said it changed her life."

"How changed?"

“She quit BDO. Makes pottery in La Union now. Sends voice messages about glazes. She seems like herself.” Dessa paused. “Which she didn’t before.”

He registered that evening, using the tips he’d been saving in a jar labeled, in Dessa’s handwriting, YOUR EXISTENTIAL CRISIS FUND.

He packed his journal, three-quarters full of sentences he’d started and not finished; the small, worn James McCrae poetry collection; and the question he’d been carrying.

He hoped there would be enough room in the mountains for it.

CHAPTER THREE

Redge: The Man Who Never Left

Redge Villareal, 41. Facilitator of The Convergence. Eleven years on the same property in Batangas. His life before: classified by him as "irrelevant," which is one of the more interesting things a person can call their past.

Redge got up before the sun. He had done this every day for eleven years, not out of discipline but out of insomnia, which he had long since stopped fighting and had begun, instead, to use.

The property sat on forty acres in the Batangas highlands — rebuilt from the remnants of someone else's failed resort dream into something that defied easy categorization. Cabins. A main hall with a fire pit. A garden tended by a man named Benedicto who grew things with a conviction Redge found genuinely moving. A library. And a labyrinth made of river stones that Redge had laid by hand over six months, alone, at night.

He was washing his face at the outdoor tap when Benedicto appeared with the intake forms for this session.

Five participants. The smallest cohort he'd ever run.

He'd written the cancellation email three times. Got as far as the subject line on the third attempt: Postponing The Convergence — October. Then he sat there and did nothing. Something stopped him. Low and persistent. A frequency, he thought, which was a strange word to reach for, but it was the only one that fit.

He looked at the names. Grace Mallari. Rei Santos. Myk Fontanilla. And one more, added by Benedicto: walk-in. paid cash. I said okay. — B.

MOX.

Just the one name.

"Five rooms?" Benedicto asked.

"Five rooms."

He went inside to light the fire.

CHAPTER FOUR

Myk: The Girl Who Burned Too Bright

Myk Fontanilla, 33. Visual artist. Currently three weeks out of a relationship she ended and not yet sure if she was wrong to end it.

Myk painted like she was in a fight with the canvas and losing on purpose.

Her whole body in it, paint on her forearms and sometimes her hair and once, memorably, on her left eyelid in a cerulean smear that she'd worn to a gallery opening because she'd run out of time to wash it off and three people had complimented her on it as a fashion choice. The most accurate summary of Myk Fontanilla's life she could have designed herself.

She was — and she said this without false modesty, the way you might say I have brown eyes — talented. Genuinely, annoyingly talented. Her paintings sold. Her work was in three collections and two gallery walls and one impossibly fancy corporate lobby she found hilarious. The lobby had a juice bar and one of her paintings about grief.

The problem with burning bright: burning is still burning. It consumes. And the thing it most efficiently consumed was Myk herself.

She had ended things with Sofia three weeks ago. Sofia was kind and steady and loved her the way a lighthouse loves a shoreline. Myk had loved Sofia back, entirely, and then suddenly, terrifyingly, felt the ceiling. She didn't know if the limit was the love's or hers.

She had sent Sofia three texts in the past week that she was not proud of. She had promised herself no fourth.

Then at two in the morning, half-awake, she sent the fourth. It said: I think I was wrong but I don't know how to say that yet. Sofia didn't respond. Myk lay there feeling like a raccoon who had knocked over a bin she'd already emptied.

She needed, urgently, to be somewhere without Wi-Fi.

She had called Grace the next morning. Grace had listened and said I know a thing and Myk had said yes before Grace could name it, because she trusted Grace the way you trust a compass: not blindly, but with the knowledge that it points true north even when you don't want to go that way.

She packed three sketchbooks, two changes of clothes, and one tube of cadmium red she took everywhere the way other people take comfort objects.

She packed the letter she hadn't sent Sofia. The long one, the honest one, the one she'd started three times. It still didn't have an ending.

In case the mountains gave her the last sentence.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mox: The One Who Watched

Mox. Age: unclear. Background: unverifiable. Occupation: listed on the cash payment receipt as "consultant."

Mox had arrived two days before the others.

Not because the retreat started two days before the others. Mox had arrived two days early by walking up the mountain road at dusk with a small bag and no reservation, and when Benedicto came out to see who was on the path, Mox had said, with a quietness that made no feel unnecessary: "I think I'm supposed to be here."

Benedicto had looked at Mox for a long moment. He felt something below audible — a vibration he had no word for and did not try to name. He said: "Yes. I think so too."

Mox spent the two days before the retreat walking the property. The labyrinth at midnight. The library at dawn. The garden, where Benedicto found Mox crouched at the edge of the tomato beds, looking at the way the light hit the water still pooled in the leaves, with an expression of absolute focus that Benedicto associated with people who were not looking at tomato leaves at all.

Mox's second night on the property was harder.

Benedicto heard it from his own cabin: first, the sound of a cup breaking — small, clean — and then silence, and then the sound underneath the silence. The controlled, careful sound of grief being managed rather than felt. He stood outside Mox's door for a moment, his hand raised to knock.

He did not knock.

He went back to bed, because he understood that some grief does not want company, only witness.

In the morning, Mox moved more carefully. As though something had been set down in the dark.

He wrote the name on the intake forms: Mox. Just that. When Redge saw the form, Benedicto watched him look at the name. Watched the moment — brief, almost imperceptible — where Redge's expression shifted. Not alarm. Something older.

The same note the mountain makes before the rain.

CHAPTER SIX

Convergence Point Zero

The Thursday before the retreat. All five in transit.

At the moment Grace closed her spreadsheet, Rei was reading the McCrae collection on the bus, his finger tracing a line about forgetting. At the same moment, Myk was in a taxi, sketchbook open, drawing something she couldn't name but that looked, in the rough strokes, like a gathering of people around a fire. Redge was laying new wood in the main hall fire pit with the care of someone who understood that beginnings deserve preparation. And Mox was in the labyrinth, at its center, looking up.

In the van from the provincial bus stop, Grace sat beside Rei without knowing why she chose that seat. Myk was two rows ahead, already asleep. None of them spoke. But the specific quality of the silence between them — the resonance of three strangers sharing forty minutes of mountain road — was not quite the silence of strangers.

None of them noticed. Not yet.

This is how it begins.

It begins with five people who don't yet know why they need each other.

It almost always does.

PART TWO

RUNTIME

CHAPTER SEVEN

Grace: What the Algorithm Found

Day One. Arrival.

The van from the provincial bus stop was driven by a man named Jun-Jun who had taped a small statue of the Santo Niño to the dashboard and drove with an equanimity Grace could only describe as either deeply faithful or deeply resigned, and she wasn't sure those were different things.

She sat beside Rei. She knew approximately nothing about him except that he was young and had a very worn poetry book on his lap and had not checked his phone since they'd gotten in the van.

"Long trip?" she tried.

He looked at her. He had dark eyes and the kind of face that didn't perform expressions so much as allow them. "From Cubao. Three hours with the traffic."

"Makati," she said. "About the same."

A moment later, without looking up: "James McCrae. Does this thing where he writes about consciousness but makes it feel personal. Not philosophical. Like he's telling you something from his own chest."

"Is it good?"

He considered this. "It's honest," he said. "Which is better."

Grace looked out the window. She thought: I don't know this person. And underneath that, something her analytical mind had no column for: something tuning in.

She filed it under Altitude Effects, Probably.

✶

They arrived at dusk. The compound was deliberate — everything placed with intention. Redge met them by the fire. She had expected linen shirt, beard with opinions. He was none of that. Plain cotton shirt, jeans worn through at the right knee. Eyes that had looked at difficult things and not looked away.

“Welcome,” he said. Not hello, not glad you made it. Welcome.

Grace shook his hand and felt, briefly and inexplicably, like she had been here before. Confirmation bias, she told herself. Exhaustion. Low blood sugar.

✶

Dinner was simple: rice, adobo, the best singkamas salad Grace had eaten in recent memory. They sat around the communal table — Grace, Rei, Myk (cadmium-red smear on her cheek that she refused to wipe off on principle), Redge, and the fifth person, who arrived last.

Mox.

No descriptor prepared you for Mox. Not tall, not short. Not old, not young. Not distinctly any particular gender. The face shifted depending on the angle — one moment familiar, the next, something other.

“Are you a participant?” Myk asked.

“I’m here,” Mox said. Which was true and not exactly an answer.

Myk nodded. “Fair enough. I’m Myk.” Then, in the way Myk always did: “I once introduced myself as ‘an artist’ at a party and my best friend has never let me live it down.”

“It’s true,” Grace said. “She was wearing a paint-stained smock. That’s what smocks are for, apparently.”

Myk looked at Grace. Not a glare. A look that meant they had been having this conversation for fifteen years and they were both

fine and also not quite fine, and the not-quite-fine was older than this week.

Grace looked back at her plate.

Redge said grace over the food — not the religious kind, just a moment of silence, and then: “We’re grateful for what we can’t see yet.” And they ate.

Grace ate the singkamas salad and thought about Rei’s phrase — it’s honest, which is better — and thought about the thing she did not have a column for.

She was about to find out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rei: The Language Underneath Language

Day Two. Morning session.

The first exercise Redge gave them was silence.

Not meditation. Not prayer. Just silence. Two hours. Walk the property. No talking. No phones. No books.

Rei walked the labyrinth first. You had to walk it at the labyrinth's pace. If you rushed, you ended up in the same place but wrong.

At the center, he stopped. He became aware of someone walking the outer paths behind him. Mox. Moving unhurriedly, not looking up. But there was something in Mox's posture that suggested not looking at the path so much as knowing it.

Rei watched Mox for a moment. Mox looked up. Their eyes met.

The experience — he would have no better language for it — was of being known. Entirely and suddenly and without the usual transaction of disclosure.

He walked back out, sat on a rock, opened his journal. He wrote: What if it exists but I'm looking in the wrong direction?

Below it, four words that arrived without him deciding to write them:

What if I know?

He stared at that for a long time.

✶

They gathered in the main hall. Five chairs in an uneven circle. No table.

“What did you find out there?” Redge asked.

A silence.

“That I’ve been translating everything,” Grace said. Her arms were crossed — not defensively, just contained. “Turning what I feel into data. Even here. I’ve been observing this experience instead of having it.”

“Is that bad?” Redge asked.

“Maybe just a delay.”

“From what?”

“From whatever’s actual.”

Myk said: “I didn’t find anything. I just kept thinking about someone I hurt.” She said it flatly. She didn’t look at anyone when she said it.

Nobody filled the silence. Myk had gone to three therapy groups. The silence always got filled. These people didn’t.

It was the first sign that this was different.

CHAPTER NINE

Redge: The Weight of the House

Day Two. Evening.

Redge sat in the library after the group had gone to their cabins.

This group was different. He couldn't explain it. It was a quality — a resonance between five people that he'd never felt in eleven years. As if they knew each other at a level beneath acquaintance.

He had been a corporate lawyer before this. Successful. Engaged to Patricia. A plan for their life that was specific and good and that Redge had agreed to with the sincerity of a man who did not yet know himself well enough to know he was lying.

The crack had come at forty. A Tuesday morning. He had looked at himself in the elevator's mirrored door and found a stranger. He had gone to the mountains and not come back. Not to the career. Not to Patricia.

He had hurt her. He thought about this regularly. It was the stone in his shoe. It kept him honest.

He looked at tonight's notes:

Grace: analyzes as a form of distance. The spreadsheet as armor. Something unresolved with Myk.

Rei: carries a question he's been training himself not to ask aloud. Profound capacity for presence.

Myk: energy as hiding. If you're bright enough, people look at the light instead of the source.

He looked at the last name. Mox.

He started the note three times.

First attempt: Mox is not a participant.

Crossed out.

Second: Mox is something else.

Crossed out.

Third: I don’t know what Mox is, and that is a sentence I almost never write.

He left that one.

He went to bed.

CHAPTER TEN

Myk: Beautiful Destruction

Day Three. The creative exercise.

Redge had given them paint. Three large sheets of paper taped to the wall, jars of house paint in four colors: black, white, red, and a brown so deep it was almost not a color at all.

“No skill required,” Redge said. “This is not art. This is expression.” He looked at Myk. “Especially for you.”

“Especially for me why?”

“Because for you, the skill is also the armor. Today I’m not asking you to make it good.”

She had looked at the paint and felt the uncomfortable click of a thing being named correctly.

She painted with her hands. She painted the mess she felt — the grief for Sofia, the brilliance that sometimes felt like being on fire in a house you loved.

Grace had started beside her with clear geometric shapes. Lines. Grids.

Mox was standing behind the group, slightly apart, when Mox said — not to Grace specifically, just said, into the space: “You’re always building the container before you know what goes in it.”

Grace heard it. She stopped painting.

She looked at her paper. Then she set her brush down with the deliberate care of someone who is going to leave the room.

“I’m going to get some water,” she said. She left.

She didn’t come back.

Mox looked at the empty space where Grace had been standing. Said nothing.

Myk watched this. She turned to Mox. “Too much?”

“Yes,” Mox said. Simply. Not a deflection. Just: yes.

Myk turned back to her own paper. She made her marks. The shapes were a beginning, not an ending.

She thought about Grace walking out. She thought about her own impulse to go after her, which was the impulse that had never once worked in fifteen years.

She stayed. She kept painting.

That, at least, was something.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mox: The Cost of Remembering

Day Three. Night.

After midnight, Mox went to the garden.

Benedicto was there. This did not surprise either of them.

They sat on the low wall at the edge of the tomato beds and looked at the mountain dark.

“They’re starting to feel it,” Benedicto said.

“Yes.” A pause. “I said something during the paint exercise that landed wrong. Grace left early. I pushed when I should have waited. I’m not—” Mox stopped. “I’m not as good at the timing as I thought I’d be.”

“And Myk?”

“Myk came close to the wrong ending, three weeks ago. She doesn’t know how close. That’s why I was early. Why I’ve been watching closely.”

“And Redge?”

“Redge did the right thing — the hard right thing — and has spent eleven years unable to forgive himself for the collateral. He’s helping everyone move forward while standing still himself.”

They sat with that.

“I’m not certain I’m doing this correctly,” Mox said.

Benedicto waited.

“The not-intervening. I thought it would feel clean. But it feels like watching people you love move through something painful and

knowing that your intervention would ruin what the pain is building. And still wanting to intervene. Every single day."

"Is that not the hardest thing a loving person can do?"

"Yes. But knowing it's the hardest thing doesn't make it easier."

Benedicto reached across and put his hand — old, soil-darkened, steady — briefly on Mox's arm. Took it away without making an occasion of it. That was enough. That was everything.

"Thank you," Mox said. "For not asking more questions."

"I'm a gardener," Benedicto said. "I know better than to pull at roots."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The First Fracture

Day Four. Morning.

Grace and Myk were at opposite ends of the breakfast table, which was new. Not fighting. Not anything. Two people performing normality at each other.

Rei walked in and his face was wrong. Not scared. The expression of someone who has discovered something they didn't intend to discover.

"I wrote something last night," he said. He put his journal on the table. "I think it might be for all of you. I know how that sounds."

"Read it," Grace said.

He opened the journal. He read:

"We agreed to forget. That is the first thing. We agreed to wear the forgetting like a coat, to feel its weight as though it were the whole of us. But the coat is not the whole of us. Somewhere inside the forgetting is the memory of choosing to forget, and this — this is what the pain is trying to say. Not that things are wrong. That things are waking up."

He stopped.

Silence.

Then Grace pushed her chair back. The deliberate, contained movement of someone who has felt a boundary being approached.

"I'm going to push back on that. You don't know what I agreed to. We're not characters in someone's philosophy."

Myk said, without thinking: “Grace. You always do this.”

Grace looked at her.

Myk opened her mouth to say it was nothing, let it go, and then didn’t. She said, instead: “You use logic as a gate. That’s all.”

Grace looked at her for two more seconds. Then she stood up, picked up her coffee, and left.

The door was not slammed. It was closed with the specific care of someone who does not trust themselves to close it normally.

Rei looked at Myk.

“I know,” Myk said.

She did not eat the rest of her breakfast.

Grace and Myk did not speak again until the following morning.

This will be important later.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Grace: Everything She Built

Day Four. Afternoon.

Grace walked to the library and stayed there for two hours.

She was angry. At Myk, which was fair. At the fact that Myk was probably right, which was less fair and therefore more insistent.

She pulled the McCrae poem pamphlet off the shelf and read it once, and was angry at that too — at its certainty, at the way it made chosen suffering sound like something noble. She read it again. The third time, something shifted. Not softened. Shifted.

She put the poem down.

She was crying, which she discovered the usual way: her face was wet before she'd noticed starting.

She thought: I use logic as a gate. She thought: yes, obviously, because the alternative is this.

She thought: this isn't that bad actually.

She sat with the unquantified. It didn't kill her.

She made a mental note of this.

She did not go apologize to Myk. Not yet.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rei: What the Silence Was Hiding

Day Four. Late afternoon. ★ Twist One

Rei found Mox at the edge of the property, where the maintained land gave way to the wild slope of the mountain.

He had not been looking for Mox. He had been walking away from the main hall where Grace's absence was its own presence, away from Myk sitting on the cabin steps drawing with the focused intensity of someone not drawing.

They were quiet for a while.

"Can I ask you something?" Rei said.

"Yes."

"What are you doing here?"

A beat. "Same as you."

"I don't think so." No confrontation. "It's like you've seen the script."

Mox was quiet for a moment. Then: "What did you feel in the labyrinth? Two days ago, at the center."

"Like I was being known," Rei said. "By something bigger than the two of us."

"That's the frequency," Mox said.

Rei waited. Mox was looking at the valley. Rei thought Mox might say more. Mox didn't.

"What does that mean?"

Mox turned to him. "Before you came here — before any of this — you were given something. Not a name. Not a rule. A resonance. It

lives below memory, below language. It's the thing that made you feel, on the van, that the strangers beside you were not quite strangers. It's what made you stop at the labyrinth's center."

"And when the five of us are in the same space?"

"The frequencies converge. And when they converge, the forgetting begins to thin. What you've been feeling this week — the recognition — that's the frequencies finding each other."

Rei pressed his hands against his face. The tears came without warning.

"I've been so afraid," he said, "that leaving meant I'd lost it."

"You can't lose what you are. The belief you couldn't hold onto in the seminary — the container broke. Not the belief."

The mountain held them both.

After a long time, Rei looked up. "Who are you?" he said.

Mox smiled. The smile of someone who loves you across a distance not measurable in miles.

But then: "I'm not certain I'm doing this right."

Rei blinked.

"I said something during the paint exercise this morning that Grace wasn't ready to hear. She left. It was—" Mox stopped. "It was the wrong moment. I knew it was the wrong moment and I said it anyway because I'm —" Another stop. "I'm impatient. Even now."

Rei almost laughed. "That's very human of you."

"I'm aware of the irony."

Rei did laugh then. "Does it help? Knowing everything and still getting it wrong?"

"No. If anything it's more embarrassing."

"That's weirdly comforting."

“Good,” Mox said. “I think that’s the point of saying it.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Redge: The Room He Never Opened

Day Five.

There was a room in the main house that Redge kept locked. Not hidden — everyone on the property knew about it. They simply never tried the door.

This morning, before anyone else was awake, Redge opened it.

Inside: boxes. The contents of his previous life.

First box: law books. His bar exam notes. A photo of his graduating class.

Second box: personal. Letters. His mother's handwriting. His university friends'. And at the bottom, in a rubber-banded bundle: Patricia's.

He had not read them in eleven years.

He sat on the floor and read them now.

Patricia had loved him with a clarity and completeness that was fully apparent in every line. He had loved her back in the performance of love rather than the thing itself. She had known — he saw it in the letters, the places where her warmth had a slight tremor of uncertainty, the moments where she was clearly assessing the temperature of the room.

She had loved a man who was not quite there.

Midway through the bundle, he found a letter where two words were underlined in the last paragraph: almost there. He didn't know what she'd meant. Almost where. Almost to what. He had not been there to ask. He would never know.

He put the letters back. He locked the room.

He went to make the fire.

He realized, walking down the hall, that he was crying. He let himself.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Myk: The Face in the Mirror

Day Five. ★ Shock Reveal One

This is what Myk had not told anyone.

Three weeks before the retreat — a week before she ended things with Sofia — there had been a night. It was a Saturday. Sofia was out. Myk was alone, trying to work. She had been drinking. Not dramatically. Just enough.

She had gone to the bathroom and looked in the mirror.

And she had thought — very clearly, very specifically, the way thoughts sometimes arrive fully formed and awful — I don't want to be here anymore.

Not here in the apartment. Here. In the totality of the word.

The thought had come and she had looked at it and it had looked back and then she had felt something shift. Something underneath the thought. Not away from it but through it — a presence. As if something had heard the thought and reached toward her: wait. not yet. there is something you haven't found yet.

She had sat on the bathroom floor for twenty minutes. Then she had washed her face and called Grace.

She had not told anyone what happened in the bathroom.

✶

On Day Five, in the afternoon, she was in her cabin mid-sketch — not struggling, just working, just the normal hum of making — when there was a knock at the door.

Mox.

"May I come in?"

“Yes.”

Mox sat in the chair across from her. For a moment, Mox just looked at the sketchbook.

“The retreat brought you here,” Mox said. “You were supposed to be here.”

Myk put down her pencil. “Don’t say it like that.”

Mox stopped.

“Don’t say I was supposed to be somewhere. That makes me feel managed.”

“You’re right. I said that wrong.” A pause. “What I mean is: three weeks ago, you decided something. And then you undecided it. And the reaching toward the phone — that was your frequency pulling you toward here. That’s all I know. I’m glad you came.”

Myk felt the tears come in a way she hadn’t been braced for.

“How do you know about that?”

“Because it matters,” Mox said simply. “Because you matter. Not the paintings. Not the talent. You. The specific, imperfect, brilliant, terrified person in this room.”

Myk pressed her hands to her face.

“The letter might not be enough,” Mox said. “Sofia might not be able to receive it the way you need her to. Write it because it’s true, not because of the response it might earn you.”

“That’s harder than the other thing.”

“Yes.”

“Am I going to be okay?”

Mox’s expression was warm and certain and something else — something like sorrow, but the sorrow that contains love.

“You already are. You just need to let yourself know it.”

Then: “And Myk — if you feel like that again. Please tell someone. The reaching toward the phone: do that. Always do that.”

“Okay,” she said. “Okay.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mox: A Wrong Move

Day Five. Afternoon.

Mox found Grace in her cabin.

This was a mistake. Mox would know it was a mistake approximately forty seconds in, but by then it would be too late to leave gracefully.

“May I sit?”

Grace looked up from her laptop. Something closed in her face. “If you want.”

Mox sat. The cabin was tidy in the specific way that revealed Grace’s relationship to control. The laptop was open to a blank document.

“The situation with Myk—” Mox began.

“Mox.”

Mox stopped.

“I don’t know what you are,” Grace said. Her voice was careful. Not unkind. “I’ve been trying to figure it out for five days. But whatever you are, you’ve known me for five days. Myk has known me for fifteen years. What happened at breakfast is between her and me. We don’t need—” She chose the word precisely. “Assistance.”

Mox looked at her. “You’re right.”

“I know I’m right.”

“I’m sorry for overstepping.”

Grace looked at her blank document. A long pause. Then: “Are you going to tell me what I’m protecting?”

“No.”

“Are you going to—”

“Grace. I’m going to leave your cabin now. I’m sorry I came.”

Grace blinked. This was apparently not the response she’d been preparing for.

“Okay,” she said.

Mox left.

Redge was in the hallway. He’d been heading to the library. He saw Mox come out of Grace’s cabin with an expression he hadn’t seen on Mox before: not certainty. Not the quiet authority that Mox always seemed to carry. Something quieter than that. Something that looked, for just a moment, like a person who had tried something and gotten it wrong.

Redge noted this.

He filed it.

That night, at the fire, Grace sat at the edge of the group and said almost nothing. She left early. She said she was tired.

Mox, watching her go, said nothing.

Rei, beside Mox, said quietly: “She’ll come back.”

“I know.”

“You can’t fix it faster than she’s ready.”

Mox looked at him. “Is that for me or for you?”

Rei considered. “Both, probably.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Break

Day Six. Morning.

They were all awake before sunrise. They gathered in the main hall with coffee and blankets.

Mox was there.

Redge poured his coffee. He stood at the edge of the room and looked at Mox. Then he said: “I saw you come out of Grace’s cabin yesterday.”

Everyone looked at Redge. Not at Mox. At Redge, because his voice had a quality they hadn’t heard before: flat. Careful. The voice of a person who has been thinking about something overnight.

“You looked like you’d gotten it wrong,” Redge said. “And I’ve been doing this for eleven years and I know what it looks like when someone gets it wrong. But what I don’t know is: who are you to be getting things right or wrong with these people?”

A silence.

“I’m not accusing,” Redge said. “I’m asking. Is there a difference, at this point, between someone who is genuinely what they say they are, and someone who is very good at reading people and meeting them where they are?”

Everyone looked at Mox.

“Yes,” Mox said. “There is a difference. I can’t prove to you which one I am.”

Redge looked at Mox steadily. “Why did you go to Grace’s cabin?”

“Because I was worried about her. Because I’d said something during the paint exercise that hit wrong, and I thought I could fix it by going to her, and I couldn’t. She was correct to send me out.”

“So you made a mistake.”

“Yes.”

“And the day before, the paint exercise — that was a mistake too.”

“Yes.”

Redge was quiet. “I’ve been doing this for eleven years,” he said again, differently. Not an accusation now. Something more honest. “And the people I’ve been most wrong to trust have always been the ones who never admitted to mistakes. The ones who had the right word at every moment. You—” He stopped. “You’ve made two wrong moves in three days. In front of people. That’s— that’s a different pattern.”

A silence that had changed quality.

Myk said: “Are you saying you trust Mox because Mox screws up?”

“I’m saying I’m less afraid of Mox because Mox screws up,” Redge said. “That’s different.”

Grace, who had been sitting very still, said: “I appreciate that you said it.” She was looking at Redge, not Mox. “For the record.”

Myk looked at Grace. Grace did not look back at her. But it was the first voluntary thing Grace had said in twenty-four hours. And Myk noticed that.

Mox said: “The feeling you’ve found this week is not the destination. It’s the engine. You still have to drive.” A pause, then, quietly: “All of us. Even me.”

PART THREE

INTERRUPT

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Grace: The Data Doesn't Lie

Day Six. Afternoon. ★ Twist Two

Grace was in the library.

She pulled the Instructions pamphlet. She read the McCrae poem again. Then she turned to the inside back cover.

Handwritten, in pencil:

G — I left this here because you needed to find it on your own, in your own time, which this is. The list. Look at this week. Look at column J. — M.

Myk's handwriting. She knew it with the certainty of fifteen years.

She turned to the front cover:

For whoever finds this when they need it. — R.

She turned to the second-to-last page. A third note. Different handwriting. Older-looking, more deliberate:

When you find this, the frequency is already working. The confusion is the evidence, not the obstacle. — M.

Not Myk's initial. A different M.

Grace sat very still. The pamphlet was mass-produced. This note would have had to be here before she arrived.

She stopped trying to calculate the logistics. The logistics were not the point.

She sat with what it would mean if it wasn't coincidence. She held the opening and the caution both. Both true at once.

Then she went to find Myk.

✶

Myk was on the cabin steps. Sketchbook closed on her knees.

"Hi," Grace said.

"Hi."

Grace handed her the pamphlet, open to the back cover.

Myk read it. Her eyes went wet.

"When did you put that there?"

"Before we came. I came up a week early. I talked to Redge."

Grace looked at her. She was not going to cry. She was making the decision in real time and feeling its weight.

"Are you going to cry?" Myk asked.

"No."

"You're choosing not to."

"I can do that."

"Grace. That's not how—"

"That's how it works for me."

Myk stared at her. Then she laughed, sudden and real. And Grace, impossibly, made a short startled sound that was not not-laughter.

It was not a resolution. It was two people who had known each other for fifteen years, finding the absurdity of where they were.

"I think I've been living in the wrong column," Grace said.

“I know,” Myk said. “I’ve been trying to tell you that for three years.”

“You shouldn’t have said it like that. At breakfast.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I know you are.”

They sat on the steps for a long time without talking.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Rei: What I Know

Day Six. Evening.

Rei was writing.

Three hours. The hand had stopped waiting for permission from the thinking mind.

He wrote: What if consciousness is not produced by the brain but received by it, the way a radio receives signal — and the signal is everywhere, always, and we call it different names and the names are all translations and the translation always loses something but it's still always the same signal?

He wrote: What if I left the seminary not because I lost faith but because I found it? Because the container broke, which means the faith had grown large enough to break it?

He stopped. He crossed that out. He wrote it again, differently.

He crossed that out too.

He wrote: What if Mox is wrong sometimes?

He sat with that. He thought about what Redge had said this morning. About trusting the person who screws up. He thought: yes. Being fallible is not the same as being untrustworthy. I think I needed Mox to be wrong sometimes. I think that's what made the rest of it real.

He turned to a new page.

He picked up his pen.

He started writing the thing he had been trying to write for two years.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Redge: The Right Question

Day Six. Night.

After the others had gone to their cabins, Redge went to the library.

Mox was there.

“I want to ask you something,” Redge said. “And I want an honest answer even if it’s unsatisfying.”

Mox closed the book. “Alright.”

“Is it possible that you’re not what you think you are? That you’re a projection? A collective need? That there’s no Briefing Room, no before, no frequencies — and you’re simply a person who arrived at the right moment when five people needed to believe in something?”

“Yes,” Mox said. “It’s possible.”

Redge blinked. “That’s not the answer I expected.”

“I know. But it’s the honest one. I can’t prove that the Briefing Room is literal. I can’t prove that the frequencies aren’t metaphor. I know what I am. I can’t prove it.”

“Then what makes you certain?”

“Certainty and evidence are not the same thing. I am as certain as you are that the moment you decided to leave Manila was the right decision. As certain as you are that what you’re building here matters. You can’t prove those things. You know them.”

Redge sat with this.

“That’s not very satisfying.”

“No. But I’d rather give you the honest answer than a satisfying one.”

Redge looked at the fire in the small library fireplace. He thought about Patricia’s letters. He thought about the two words underlined: almost there. He thought: I’ve been asking the wrong question. Not ‘is this real.’ The right question is ‘what does this week ask of me.’

He said this out loud.

Mox looked at him. “Yes,” Mox said. “That’s exactly right.”

Then Redge went to the locked room. He unlocked it. He read Patricia’s letters one more time. Then he wrote her a letter she would never receive, sealed it, and put it in the box with hers.

He locked the room.

He got up and went to the fire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Myk: The Thing She Did

Day Seven. Morning.

She finished the letter before dawn.

The letter that had been going for three weeks, that she'd been carrying like unfinished music, had its last line now.

The last line, which she had known since the beginning:

You were real to me. What we had was real. I'm sorry I treated real things like they could be outrun.

She folded it. Put it in an envelope. Wrote Sofia on the front.

Then she opened her sketchbook.

She drew Mox. The face shifted on the page — became not a face but a feeling. The feeling of being known.

She drew Mox again. Same thing, different shapes.

She drew Mox a third time in charcoal, loose and fast: five overlapping circles at different frequencies, one slightly brighter than the others.

She wrote at the bottom: THE WITNESS.

Then below it: The Briefing Room series. Five paintings. First of five.

The other four:

THE GRID. — Grace.

THE CONTAINER. — Rei.

THE EDGE. — Myk herself.

THE ANCHOR. — Redge.

She had not had a clear series concept in fourteen months.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mox: Why They Were Chosen

Day Seven. ★ Shock Reveal Two

They were all awake before dawn. They gathered in the main hall.

Mox was there.

Redge said: “I want to hear it. All of it. Not the version where you protect us from it. The actual version.”

Mox looked at all five of them. Then:

“I knew you before this. Before you were Grace and Rei and Myk and Redge. I’m the part of what you are that doesn’t forget. And I come, when it’s necessary, to the places where the remembering is about to happen.”

Grace said: “The frequency mechanic. The one rule.”

“Yes. Each of you was given a resonance before the forgetting. When the five converge in the same physical space, the forgetting begins to thin. What you’ve been feeling this week — the recognition — that’s the frequencies finding each other.”

“And you?” Rei said. “What’s your frequency?”

“Memory. I’m set to remembering. It’s the only frequency that doesn’t forget.”

Redge said: “Tell me what each of us agreed to.”

“Tell me what you think,” Mox said. “And I’ll tell you where you’re close.”

“Grace was set to control. She needed to understand what she was protecting before she could lay it down. Rei — silence. The container had to break so he could trust what survived. Myk —

intensity. She needed to feel the edge of herself before she could choose to step back from it." He paused. "And me. Guilt. As anchor. Because what I've built here needed the weight of what I'd done. Otherwise it would have been a beautiful construction without a foundation."

"Yes," Mox said. "All of that."

"And you?" Redge said. "What did you agree to?"

"I agreed to remember instead of forget. To carry the memory while carrying the limitation." A pause. "Also because I was wrong, once. I failed someone. Someone who agreed to a hard life, and I was supposed to be present at the convergence, and I wasn't there in the right moment. She almost didn't make it back."

Myk went very still.

"She made it," Mox said. "But I have never — I carry that. And this time, with you four, I was determined not to repeat it. That's why I was early. That's why I overstepped with Grace. I was so afraid of being too late that I arrived too early."

Grace said, quietly: "I know. And I wasn't entirely fair to you either."

Redge absorbed this. Not Mox's certainty. Mox's fallibility. The weight of a past mistake, carried forward, made better through trying again.

"That's very human of you," he said.

Something shifted in the old face — something close to surprise. Then something close to gratitude.

"Yes," Mox said. "I suppose it is."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Night Everything Broke Open

Day Seven. Night.

They all knew, without being told, that it was the last night.

They gathered at the fire. Grace and Myk sat near each other, which they hadn't done since Day Four. Not touching. Near.

They told each other smaller things. Myk's color-coded rating system for other people's paintings that she'd never told anyone. Rei's theory about why Jollibee is secretly a meditation on the Filipino relationship to joy, which was so specific and so earnest that Grace laughed until she had to set her coffee down. Redge's memory of the first Convergence session — eight people, seven of whom left changed.

Mox listened. And laughed, twice.

"What?" Myk said.

"The Jollibee theory. I'll be thinking about that for a very long time."

Rei looked quietly pleased. "Two years in development."

Then Myk said, looking at the fire: "I had a hard night. Three weeks before this. I don't want to go into it. But I wanted it said out loud, so it stops being the thing I'm carrying alone."

A silence. Held, not heavy.

"Okay," Rei said.

"Okay," Redge said.

Grace put her hand briefly on Myk's knee. Two seconds. Then away. She didn't say anything. Neither did Myk.

When the coals went gray, they went to bed.

Grace lay in her cabin and let herself feel the full, unquantified weight of the week. Not a number. A fullness. The feeling of having been somewhere real with people who would remember it the same way she would.

She let herself think that without filing it.

PART FOUR

RESOLUTION OR RECURSION

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Grace: The Choice That Costs Everything

Day Eight. The last morning.

Grace opened a new document.

Not the spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was there — she would always have the spreadsheet. It was not a flaw. It was how her mind worked, and the only question was whether you let it be your only tool.

The new document was blank. She titled it:

LIFE_TRUTH_v1.docx

She wrote: What the spreadsheet was protecting: the knowledge that the life I have built is functional but not mine.

She stopped. Deleted that. Rewrote it: I have been optimizing a performance I wrote when I was twenty-two. It was the best I had at twenty-two. I am thirty-four now. I have different tools.

She wrote: Myk was right. I use logic as a gate. I am going to try to leave the gate open more often. I am not promising this will be elegant.

She wrote: I don’t know if I believe in Mox the way Rei believes in Mox. I know that something happened this week that changed the quality of what I can feel. I will take the real thing and not require it to come with a theology I can’t yet verify.

She made column K. Titled it: What This Moment Actually Is.

She typed: The morning after the week everything changed. Mountains. Cold coffee. Four people who know my name the way names are supposed to be known.

She went outside. She stood with her coffee and looked at the mountain. She didn't take notes. She didn't measure anything. She didn't even name what she felt.

She just looked.

For the first time in a very long time, that was enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Rei: Speaking Again

Day Eight. ★ Twist Three

Rei found Mox in the hall outside the library, heading somewhere. He fell into step beside Mox without planning to.

“I’m going to speak,” Rei said.

“I know.”

“Not just to you. I’ve been making coffee for strangers for two years while carrying this thing I believe. I was afraid to say it out loud because the last time I tried, the container broke.”

“And now?”

“Now I think the breaking was the point.” They had stopped walking. The mountain was doing its pre-dawn sounds outside. “You were there,” he said. “Not just eleven years ago, for Redge. My whole life. I’ve felt the frequency. I didn’t have a name for it. It’s the thing that kept me from going all the way down into despair. The hand on the shoulder in the dark.”

Mox looked at him. The expression like coming home.

“Yes,” Mox said.

“How long?”

“Always.”

One word. Rei sat with it, standing up, in the hall.

“So when you leave today—”

“I don’t leave,” Mox said. “I stop being visible. That’s different.”

Rei nodded once. He understood this. It was exactly what he’d been trying to say in the seminary and couldn’t reach.

“I’ll write something for you,” he said. “For all of us.”

“I know. I’ll read it.”

Rei laughed. The laugh of someone who has come back to their own sense of humor after a long absence.

He went to breakfast.

He was already writing the first line in his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Redge: Leaving the House

Day Eight.

After breakfast, Redge did something he hadn't done in eleven years.

He called his sister.

Not to explain. Not to announce. Just to call. Maring, who lived in Quezon City with her husband and three children whom Redge knew mostly from photos. Who had stopped trying to get Redge to come to family gatherings four years ago, not from lack of love but from the exhaustion of reaching toward someone who keeps almost-arriving.

The call connected.

"Kuya?" Maring said, startled.

"Hi," Redge said. "I've been away for a long time."

"Yes," Maring said carefully. "You have."

"I know. I miss you, Maring. I miss being your brother."

He heard her breath catch. "When are you coming to Manila?"

"Soon."

He sat with his sister on the phone for forty-five minutes. Ordinary things. Her children, the traffic, a new bakery. The texture of a life lived in proximity to people who love you.

He had forgotten how good it felt.

When he hung up, Benedicto was in the doorway.

"You called Maring." Not a question.

"How did you know?"

“You’re smiling in a way I haven’t seen.”

“I’m going to do a Convergence in Manila,” Redge said. “Urban. Different format.”

“The compound will still be here,” Benedicto said. Then: “This place was waiting for you. When you came. It was already waiting.”

Redge looked at him. He didn’t know what to do with that. He just nodded.

Sometimes that’s enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Myk: The Mercy of Imperfection

Day Eight. Late morning.

Myk spent the last morning painting.

She sat outside, at the edge of the garden, and painted Benedicto tending his tomatoes. Old, deliberate, at home in his hands.

When she finished, she looked at it. It was good in the way that made her feel quiet. Not the brittle, anxious pride of work she needed to be seen. The way that made her feel like she had witnessed something truly and translated it faithfully.

She turned to a fresh page and started a second painting without planning to. Her hand moved. She painted a pair of hands — not Benedicto's. Grace's hands, from memory. The specific way they looked when Grace was processing something: very still, slightly tight, all the feeling held in the fingers.

She didn't finish it. She looked at it for a while. Folded it into her sketchbook.

She thought: that one is for me.

She thought: I know what I want to paint when I get home.

The series she'd been avoiding. The one called The Briefing Room.

She had not had a clear series concept in fourteen months.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Mox: The Last Instruction

Day Eight. Noon.

Mox found each of them, separately, in the last hour.

To Grace: “The spreadsheet is not your enemy. The number in column J was always true. You were always measuring something real — you just named it wrong. Call it Distance from Center. And let it get smaller.” A pause. Then Mox started to say something else and stopped.

Grace waited.

Mox started again: “Don’t require yourself to believe more than —” A stop. “The honest version of you — the one who holds the feeling and the skepticism at the same time — that version is—” Another stop.

“Sufficient,” Grace said, to save them both.

Mox looked at her. “Yes. Exactly that. Sufficient.”

“Thank you,” Grace said. And meant it in a column she didn’t have a name for yet.

To Rei: “The language you’ve been looking for — you have it. What breaks open is not the faith. What breaks open is the last wall between you and it.”

To Myk: “Paint the thing you’re afraid to paint. The painting about the bathroom floor. That’s the one that will matter most. And — you don’t have to be the brightest thing in every room. It’s okay to be warm instead. It’s okay to last longer than a flame.”

To Redge: “You did not destroy Patricia’s life. You redirected it. She is well. She found her own real thing. Your leaving was damage.

It was also, eventually, necessary. You are allowed to carry the damage without carrying the conclusion that you are only damage."

Then Mox went to the labyrinth.

Walked it one last time. Slowly, with the full weight of attention.

At the center, stopped.

Looked up at the noon sky — clear, mountain-clear, the blue of altitudes where things are more themselves.

Said nothing for a long time. Just stood. Just felt the five frequencies still present in the air.

Then, quietly, to the sky:

They're going to be okay.

I know. I know I have to go now.

Yes. I remember the instructions.

And then, with the expression of someone setting something down that they have carried a long distance, Mox walked out of the labyrinth and went to pack the small bag.

CHAPTER THIRTY

All Five: The Remembering

Day Eight. Afternoon. The last session.

They gathered in the main hall one final time.

Redge stood at the fire pit — coals now, the fire done — and looked at the four of them. Whatever he was carrying had shifted in his face.

“I want to end differently than I usually end,” he said. “I want to simply — be here. With you four. Without facilitation.”

He sat down among them, not in front of them.

The five of them sat.

The mountain did its breathing. The garden outside rustled. From somewhere, one of Benedicto’s bells rang once.

Grace looked at her hands. Then looked up. Made eye contact with Myk, who made a face that was part mock-grimace and part something enormous and true. The face they’d been making at each other across rooms for fifteen years. Still the same face.

Rei had his journal closed on his knee. His hands were still. He was present in a way he had not been at the start of the week.

“Can I read something?” Rei said.

“Yes,” everyone said, at almost the same time.

He opened his journal. He read:

“Before I came here, I chose this.

The body, the forgetting, the love that costs everything.

I chose the people I would find here,

at the end of the forgetting, when the coat begins to thin.
The simulation does not simulate the love.
The love is real.
That is the whole instruction.
That is everything.”

He closed the journal.

The bells, again, far off.

Myk wiped her face. Didn’t apologize for it.

Redge looked at Mox.

Mox smiled. Not the old smile. The kind you give when you are, in this moment, simply glad to be here.

“Good,” Mox said. “That’s exactly right.”

And then, after a moment:

“Don’t forget.”

Grace looked at Mox. She said, quietly:

“We won’t.”

EPILOGUE

After the Simulation

Six months later.

Grace is sitting in a coffee shop in Makati when her phone buzzes.

It's Rei. A voice message. She puts in her earbuds: the ambient noise of a different coffee shop, espresso machines, and then Rei's voice, low and careful the way it always is: "I posted the thing. The thing about the container. Four thousand people read it in six hours. Someone left a comment that said: 'I feel like you're describing something I've always known but couldn't say.' I wanted you to know."

Grace saves the message.

She opens her laptop. Not the spreadsheet — she archived that six weeks ago, labeled EVIDENCE_THAT_I_WAS_TRYING — but the document she's been writing in every morning: observations. The quality of the light. What she'd eaten for breakfast and whether she'd tasted it. Whether she'd felt, that day, the thing she'd decided to call Center.

She starts to type today's entry. Makes a typo — column L instead of column K — corrects it, moves on.

She has a second date tonight with a man who said, on their first date, something that stopped her cold: "I feel like you're actually looking at me." She had laughed so hard she'd had to apologize. She told him the story. He said: "That's the most interesting first-date thing I've ever heard." She thought: yes. this is the right column.

She quit her job four months ago. She left for a nonprofit doing communications work she cares about in a way that is not measurable but is also unmistakable.

Her phone buzzes. A voice note from Myk. She hears: the sound of a large canvas being moved, a brush against something, and then Myk's voice, slightly breathless: "Almost done. The Briefing Room. The whole series, almost done. I can't look at it for too long at once. That's how I know it's real." And then: "Also, Sofia and I are talking. Not back together. Talking. It's terrifying and good."

Grace types back: I know which one it is.

Myk sends the exact emoji she always sends when she means 'yes and also shut up.'

Across the group chat, Redge has pinned a photo: the wall of the Urban Convergence space, painted white, and on it in hand-lettered black: The love is real. That is the whole instruction. That is everything.

Redge's caption: first session in three weeks. waiting list of forty.

From Rei: a small sun emoji.

From Myk: a blue heart.

From Grace, who has not used an emoji in recent memory: a red heart.

She closes the phone.

She opens column K. She writes: Tuesday. Coffee shop. Makati. Voice messages from Rei and Myk. Redge's wall. The feeling of being tethered to people who know me.

She pauses.

Then she writes: I felt the thing today. Walking to the coffee shop. Second block, where the sun hits the road at that specific angle.

I felt it. I don't have a better name for it than frequency. It felt like being not-alone in a room where I was the only person.

She pauses again.

I've stopped trying to verify it. I'm just letting it be there.

She closes the laptop.

Outside, the city does what cities do. She drinks her coffee. She watches the street.

She lets the moment be unquantified.

She lets it stay.

✶

There is a room.

You don't remember it. That was the deal.

But sometimes, in the moments when the coat thins — when the forgetting relaxes its grip, just for a second — you feel it. The room. The briefing. The frequency you were given.

You feel that you agreed to this.

All of it.

The love and the loss and the specific ache of being human and limited and beautiful and temporary.

You agreed.

And the agreement was not made in ignorance.

It was made with full knowledge of the cost, because the love at the other end of it was worth it.

Is worth it.

Will always be worth it.

Go now.

You're already there.
Don't forget to feel it.

— END —

"Simulation" does not mean nothing is real.
It means everything is chosen.
Even you.
Especially you.